

## **The Birth of British Television**

MARK ALDRIDGE, 2012

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pp. viii. + 223, illus., bibliography, journals and periodicals, archive sources,  
filmography and teleography, references and notes, index.

Mark Aldridge's history of early television in Britain begins from the premise that the launch of BBC's television service in 1936 'meant that the principle of television had finally found its place' (p. 1). Each of the four sections of *The Birth of British Television* draws extensively on archive material to relate how different sets of players contributed to the foundation of television. Section one, *Private Television*, focusses on the experiments of television's pioneers, particularly the controversial Scottish inventor, John Logie Baird who: 'initially perceived television as a wholly private enterprise that could only receive funding from the sale of sets' (p. 15). Early demonstrations, including that of Baird at Selfridge's department store in London in 1925, did not inspire much confidence in television as an economically or aesthetically viable enterprise. Given that the transmitters were owned by the BBC and access to the airwaves was monitored by the Post Office, Baird was obliged to engage in discussions with both in order to pursue his experiments in television. Aldridge draws extensively on the archives of both these organizations to recount the complex machinations by which Baird was eventually granted permission to run experimental broadcasts from the BBC. The relationship between Baird and the Corporation remained fractious throughout this period, a situation aggravated by the fact that the Baird system was inferior to that used by Marconi-EMI – the company whose system the BBC eventually adopted. The individualistic approach of the lone inventor of 'private television' had failed and Baird himself acknowledged: 'Our policy of facing the world singlehandedly was sheer insanity' (p. 62).

The second section, *Public Television*, focusses on the process by which television became a 'public service' using archive material relating to submissions to the Selsdon Television Committee of 1935 and the public exhibition of television at Radiolympia. Gerald Cock summed up something of the BBC's attitude when he wrote of the Radiolympia exhibition in an internal BBC document: 'Television is still a strain on the attention' (p. 94). At a time when the cinema provided access to high quality audio visual entertainment, television's advocates played to its unique quality of 'liveness' while its technological reliance on a nationalized resource – the airwaves – ensured it was also being increasingly located as a 'public service'. Aldridge explores the *Wider Perspectives* of press coverage of television experimentation in section three, mainly focusing on the key dates of 1925 (Baird's first display at Selfridges) and 1936 (the launch of the BBC service). The final section, *Television Goes Public*, considers the content of early television of which there is scant extant material evidence. There is an interesting discussion of the *Television Demonstration Film*, used by the retail trade to promote television sales which included a broad range of material on show from Margot Fonteyn to the Pearly

King and Queen. The magazine programme, *Picture Page* and the ballet *Checkmate* (first transmitted in February 1939) are among those analysed. Aldridge observes of television content, that: 'Television was a facilitator, a way of allowing the audience to witness things from the comfort of their own home. What it was not, at this point, was a distinctive original creator of material' (p. 149). Aldridge concludes that the future shape of television as a public service for domestic consumption was largely determined during this period.

A primary responsibility of the historian is to create meaningful stories from the chaotic cacophony of material reality and one of the first imperatives is to decide how to begin and end the story. Aldridge brackets his tale between two key events: Baird's demonstration in 1925 and the BBC's launch of a regular television service in 1936. Perhaps telling the story in this way overvalues the contributions of Baird and the BBC. The methodological dependence on archive sources compounds this emphasis as both parties generated considerable written resources attendant upon attitudes ranging from self-preservation to self-aggrandizement.

A discursive error of which all media historians should be wary is *teleology*; history as a backwards glance from the author's contemporary position will necessarily exclude paths not taken and occlude routes which later proved to be dead ends. In this discussion, Aldridge makes two teleological assumptions: that the location of television in the domestic sphere was a foregone conclusion and that television was destined to be a 'public service'. We know that there were unofficial, pirate broadcasts and other forms of commercial broadcasting through most of the early history of radio and television broadcasting, yet this important (unofficial) history is not noted here. Aldridge also neglects to consider the exhibition of television experiments in cinemas, theatres, clubs and pubs. But more significantly, the idea of 'public service' in inter-war Britain was typically used to refer to public utilities such as gas, transport and electricity; economic goods which were state owned and controlled. 'Public service' did not necessarily have the rather high minded cultural association it acquired latterly. Despite these limitations, Aldridge has written a valuable contribution to the history of early television in Britain, drawing extensively on a rich range of archive material.

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